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## WALTER RUSSELL MEAD

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Posted on January 8th, 2010 [Do Jeffersonians Exist?](#)

*Time Magazine's* Joe Klein has joined Matthew Yglesias and Rush Limbaugh in [raising questions](#) about my recent *Foreign Policy* [article](#) on Obama's foreign policy roots. That gives me the punditry equivalent of a perfect storm: the piece is being criticized by left, right and center.

Klein, however, raises much more sophisticated and thoughtful questions than the others and he makes some sensible points. Klein's basic criticism of the article is that Obama isn't a wimpy isolationist or ideologue; he's a pragmatic realist who is seriously and passionately engaged with foreign affairs. Moreover, his goal is to advance American power and influence, not to reduce it.

This is basically right; the issue between Klein and Mead here is over the definition of Jeffersonian, not over the description of Obama. Over at his always-interesting blog [Eunomia](#), Daniel Larison levels a similar and even more thorough critique not simply at my classification of Obama as a Jeffersonian but at the concept of Jeffersonianism developed in [Special Providence](#). (In fact, Larison thinks the whole book stinks, and that the flaws in the *FP* article simply point to the yawning gaps in my whole conceptual framework.)

Larison and Klein both center their critiques on the point that Obama is a card-carrying member of the liberal internationalist elite that has been the dominant force in American foreign policy pretty much since World War II. (Klein thinks that's a good thing; Larison doesn't.) Jeffersonians want to withdraw from this kind of international governance; either Mead is wrong in calling Obama a Jeffersonian or his definition of Jeffersonian is so flexible and broad that the category is useless.

While I don't think this line of argument works as well as Klein, Larison and some others, do there is a real point here. The four categories in *Special Providence* are intended to be suggestive and evocative and the Jeffersonian category is probably the most complex and even elusive of the four. *Special Providence* is a book of historical reflection, not an act of political science category-building. I'm not a political scientist and while some political scientists have done some interesting work by adapting these categories in various ways, that's not a game I'm qualified to play.

I don't try to work this out systematically in *Special Providence*, but the book discusses three types or maybe flavors of Jeffersonian. (All of the categories have subgroups, by the way: there have been free-trade and protectionist Hamiltonians, liberal and neo-conservative Wilsonians, traditional and crabgrass Jacksonians. Maybe someday I'll write a sequel.) There are the libertarian Jeffersonians who tend to be skeptical of America's contemporary global engagements and objectives on classic small-government grounds. The [Cato Institute](#) does work that often reflects this perspective. The conservative opposition to George W. Bush's foreign policy and some of the ["paleo-conservatives"](#) who have attacked the aggressively globalist neoconservatives also often fit this description.

There are also left-Jeffersonians. Lori Wallach, Ralph Nader, [Naomi Klein](#), [William Greider](#) and other critics of the globalist establishment from a left-populist perspective base their opposition to central bank cabals and the World Trade Organization on the very Jeffersonian view that powerful elites used these international organizations and agreements to impose a corporation-friendly elite project on the American people at large.

Left and right Jeffersonians argue bitterly among themselves about who most deserves the mantle of Thomas Jefferson; that's not a question I feel compelled to adjudicate. Thomas Jefferson had a complex mind and his views frequently changed as the situation changed around him through more than half a century of public life. But I think both the left and the right Jeffersonians can legitimately claim a vital connection with at least some of the major themes to which he kept returning.

The third type of Jeffersonian that appears in *Special Providence* is, I think, the most interesting kind. These 'high' Jeffersonians think that many of the left and right Jeffersonians are knee-jerk Jeffersonians. That is, their instincts are good but their policy approach is unsound. The high Jeffersonians aren't particularly happy that the United States has vital strategic interests that connect it to the rest of the world in complex and sometimes unsatisfactory and dangerous ways. Unlike Hamiltonians and Wilsonians, who tend to see foreign policy as a field of dreams and who look forward eagerly to new projects for economic, legal and democratic order building, high Jeffersonians have serious qualms about the costs and the consequences of these projects. High Jeffersonians seek to create strategic architectures that address the nation's broad and often global interests at the lowest possible risk and cost.



[table of contents](#)

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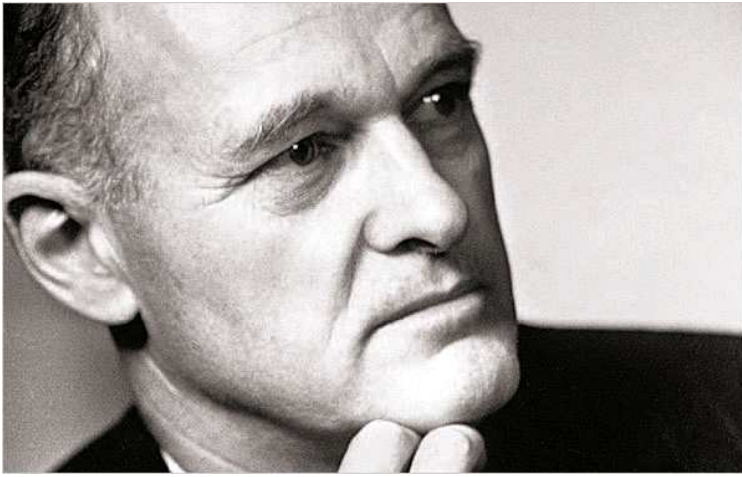
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- [November 2009](#)
- [October 2009](#)
- [September 2009](#)

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- [Books & Literature](#) (4)
- [Economics](#) (5)
- [History](#) (16)
- [American History](#) (7)
- [Anglo-American Project](#) (3)
- [Decline of Europe](#) (2)
- [Fall of Europe](#) (1)
- [Rise of Asia](#) (2)





One example I cite in the book is George Kennan, who developed the [concept of containment](#) in the hopes that it would allow the U.S. to pursue its legitimate and necessary interest in defending itself and key global power centers from the Soviet Union after World War II. I also argue that John Quincy Adams (the real author of the [Monroe Doctrine](#)) was a high Jeffersonian who figured out a way for the U.S. to advance its core interests by making British world power work for us rather than against us. *Special Providence* also points to Walter Lippmann and his concept of 'solvency' in foreign policy as an example of Jeffersonian thinking. Both in the book and in the article I point to Henry Kissinger as another figure who sought to build a strategic architecture that recognized both the sharp limits of American power and the global nature of American interests, though the Kissinger case is a complicated one. In *Special Providence* I also say that while all the schools have legitimate points to make and play valuable roles in the American political process, this high Jeffersonian approach is my own personal favorite.

Before World War II, most high Jeffersonians thought that the United States should follow the strategic vision of John Quincy Adams and enjoy the fruits of the Britain-based economic and political system without paying its costs — while endlessly carping at Britain for doing everything wrong. As Britain grew weaker, it was no longer able to keep the world system running. The Depression, World War II and the post-war Soviet push into Europe convinced most high Jeffersonians that the United States needed to step into something like Britain's historical role as the central power in the world system. Hamiltonians and Wilsonians saw this as a grand opportunity; high Jeffersonians saw it as an unwelcome and dangerous but necessary task.

This is the kind of Jeffersonianism that in my opinion best describes President Obama. His political roots and support are more on the left than the right side of the Jeffersonian spectrum, but his head is with the high Jeffersonians who think a cautious and strategic approach to maintaining the global political and economic system is the cheapest and most promising way to defend essential American economic and security interests. I think he is generally right about this; and at this level my questions and doubts revolve around whether the means he proposes can achieve the results that he seeks. I certainly wish him well and if he succeeds in developing a less costly and dangerous approach for the American world position I will gladly acknowledge him as one of our most important foreign policy presidents.

My fears as opposed to my hopes come from two sources. First, it's not enough to envision your desired end state. You have to have a realistic and politically sustainable plan for getting there. All of the American foreign policy schools in all their flavors have their political pluses and minuses; Jacksonians rush into rash wars, for example, and Jeffersonians can be portrayed as vacillating and weak. That's especially true when, as in Obama's case, foreign policy success depends in part on the cooperation of other powers. If Iran goes on



trying to build a bomb no matter what Obama does, that's a bigger political problem for him at home than it would be for a Jacksonian who was looking for an excuse to bomb Teheran. (The Jacksonian's political problems might start when and if the war went badly.)

But the other source of difficulty for Obama is, as I wrote in the article, the streak of liberal Wilsonianism one sees in him sometimes, and certainly in parts of his political base. The attempt to combine a Wilsonian program for promoting human rights abroad with Jeffersonian caution and strategy can easily lead you into a policy that looks like picking on the weak. You suck up to Beijing and you censure Honduras.

Your intent is to advance human rights in a responsible way; you can look like a posturing hypocrite — and a moral coward to boot. (I don't say that's what you are; I say that's how your critics can make you look.) I don't say the two can't be effectively combined, or shouldn't be. I merely say that this is one of the hardest things in American politics to pull off — and Jimmy Carter failed.

Anyway, thanks to Joe Klein and Daniel Larison for the stimulating critiques. Frankly I'd prefer having [three wise men](#) show up at my door with gold, frankincense and myrrh whenever I publish something, but intelligent

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- [Obama](#) (14)
- [Politics](#) (16)
  - [Global Warming](#) (6)
  - [Health Care](#) (2)
- [Religion](#) (18)
  - [Christianity](#) (16)
  - [Islam](#) (6)
  - [Judaism](#) (5)
- [U.S. Foreign Policy](#) (25)
  - [Afghanistan & Iraq](#) (2)
  - [Africa](#) (2)
  - [Asia](#) (2)
  - [Europe](#) (4)
  - [Latin America](#) (1)
  - [Middle East](#) (5)
- [Uncategorized](#) (78)
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and thoughtful critics are the next best thing. Trying to explain yourself to a smart critic may not convince the critic or dig you out of a hole, but it challenges you to ask the tough questions that you might otherwise miss.

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